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Summer 2018

# Argentina's Dirty War: Memory, Repression and Long-Term Consequences

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### Recommended Citation

Dutton, Ilana, "Argentina's Dirty War: Memory, Repression and Long-Term Consequences" (2018). *Summer Research*. 308.  
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Argentina's Dirty War: Memory, Repression and Long-Term Consequences  
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September 17, 2018

### **Abstract**

The Dirty War in Argentina refers to an eight-year period, between 1976 and 1983, in which a right-wing government purged Argentina of left-wing “subversives”. The Dirty War is defined by violent tactics, repression, and cover up. This paper explores the dominant public narrative of the Dirty War by coding and analyzing primary sources from victims, families, and perpetrators. The final goal of this paper was to understand how key groups talk about the Dirty War and what the long-term consequences of that are for Argentina. The democratic governments that took power after the Dirty War followed the military junta’s tactics of hiding key information and offering pardons to military officials, preventing people from knowing the truth about what happened to their loved ones. The torture and cover up tactics used by the government prevented Argentine citizens from receiving much needed closure in the Dirty War, which means there is still pain in society that people are reconciling with.

**Key Words:** Argentina, Dirty War, Memory, Long-term Consequences, Closure

Argentina's Dirty War began over 42 years ago, but the conversation about that eight-year period is still full of mystery and trauma. The tactic of "disappearing" subversives used by the government means there is little evidence of its crimes. The almost universal message of denial by the Argentinian government means that it is almost impossible for survivors and their families to get closure. These circumstances have turned memory into a political entity in Argentina. The government repressed memory to control the population and hide what they were doing, and this has had long-term consequences on Argentinian families. By erasing evidence, silencing entire families, effective media campaigns, and almost universal denial, the government was successful for the most part in controlling the memory of its citizens.

Despite the effectiveness of the government's memory repression campaign, organizations like Los Madres/Abuelas del Plaza de Mayo, Memoria Abierta, and other human rights groups, have fought hard to preserve the public's memory of the Dirty War. They have done this by consolidating testimonies and trying to force the government to be accountable. To keep the memory of their loved ones alive, the families and friends of the victims are forced to constantly relive their trauma. This paper examines the stories, testimonies, and media response to the Dirty War to find out what shapes the Argentine public's memory of these events. From my analysis of the stories, I will begin to draw conclusions about how the government tactics impact memory and how that has continued to impact society.

### **History of the Dirty War**

The Dirty war of Argentina is the eight-year campaign in which a military dictatorship initiated a campaign of violence against left-wing "subversives".<sup>1</sup> The term "Dirty War" was coined by the military government in 1976 as a method of justifying their actions as necessary

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<sup>1</sup> Americas | Q&A Argentina's Grim Past

and justified by a doctrine of war.<sup>2</sup> While the goal of this paper is to understand the rhetoric used to talk about the Dirty War and the consequences of the Dirty War that are still felt today, it is difficult to do that without a basic understanding of the history of Argentina and how the military government came to power. The coup d'état that led to the Dirty War was not an isolated attack on Argentinian democracy, and the political and economic instability beginning in the early 1900s paved the way for the military government to cause the amount of damage that they did.<sup>3</sup>

A series of revolts and economic crises are the foundations of Argentina's instable democratic institutions and set the stage for long-term tensions within the country.<sup>4</sup> Historically, Argentina's lack of economic diversity and the inequality between land-owners and those who worked the land led to persistent economic and social tensions despite the democratization of the country. Beyond that, Argentina's democratic institutions placed few constraints on how political power could be used. Thus, the governments of Yrigoyen and Perón, in the 1920s and 1940s, respectively, used their power to further perpetuate inequality.<sup>5</sup> The economic instability and unrest among citizens from the beginning of Argentinian democracy meant that Argentina in the 1900s was defined by revolts and overturning of power, allowing a window for various government leaders to monopolize on that to overthrow the government.

The coup that began the Dirty War is not the only junta of relevance in Argentina during the 1900s. In 1943 a junta, which established a military dictatorship, began Juan Perón's rise to power.<sup>6</sup> Perón began as the director the National Labor Organization and used his time in the

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<sup>2</sup> Jerry Knudson, *Veil of Silence* (1997) 93

<sup>3</sup> Los Madres de Plaza de Mayo, *Argentina's History and The Dirty War* (2012)

<sup>4</sup> Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson, *Economic Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) 352

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Katherine Wolfden, *Perón and the People: Democracy and Authoritarianism in Juan Perón's Argentina* (2013)

cabinet to solidify his personal popularity. In 1946, Perón was elected president, despite attempts within the military to end his rise to power.<sup>7</sup> As a leader, Perón recognized the importance of voting for Argentinian citizens and was described as a “populist”. He was ousted and exiled in 1955, but that was not the end of his political power in Argentina. He continued to build the Peronist movement outside of the country until his return in 1973 when he regained the presidency. When he died in 1974, his wife, Isabel Perón took power and led Argentina until she was ousted by the coup that began the Dirty War.

The military government came to power March 24, 1976 and placed General Jorge Videla in control of a politically unstable Argentina.<sup>8</sup> Considering Argentina’s long history of political and economic instability, a military coup was not surprising, but the long-term consequences of this coup were unprecedented. The military government prided itself in rooting out left-wing subversives, using the word “war” to legitimize their actions.<sup>9</sup> By claiming that the elimination of left-wing subversives was a solution to the “national security” concern they created, the military government functioned beyond the limits of Argentinian and international law.<sup>10</sup> To justify these actions, the government pointed to violent radical leftist’s actions that defined the 1970s prior to the Dirty War. In 1970, far-left terrorists kidnapped and killed the ex-president Armaburu, which began the anti-leftist rhetoric throughout Argentina.<sup>11</sup>

### **Repression of Memory in the Dirty War**

Prior to exploring specific themes in memories and accounts of the Dirty War, it is important to understand why memory played such an important role in the Dirty War. The suppression of memory was a tactic used by the military government in Argentina to control the

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<sup>7</sup> Juan Peron, *Bibliography*

<sup>8</sup> Americas | Q&A Argentina’s Grim Past

<sup>9</sup> Genocide Resources, *Atrocities in Argentina (1976–1983)*

<sup>10</sup> MKT, *La Guerra Sucia En Argentina Y La Resistencia De Las Madres De Plaza De Mayo* (2016)

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*

population and prevent an uprising in response to the violence during and after the dictatorship. While repression of memory is a broad topic, for the purposes of this research I will be focusing on why memory is an important part of national identity and the tactics of silencing the population used during the Dirty War. I will begin by exploring the role memory plays in traumatic events by highlighting research done by other scholars to explain why memory is important in the building of an identity. From there I will describe the specific tactics used during the Dirty War to suppress memory and explain why they were effective.

The strategy of memory suppression did not originate in the Argentine Dirty War. Social memory is defined as “a subfield of the sociology of knowledge and broadly as the ‘connective structure of societies’”.<sup>12</sup> Memory is something that ties a society together, making it a critical element of building a national identity. Memory is often first seen as a repetition of an event, that eventually turns into a recollection of an event, which means it is something that could be altered.<sup>13</sup> These general qualities of memory mean that in times of political or social turmoil, the government sees memory as having political capital, which results in the use of memory control a population.

A tactic of the junta was to divide the population, based on the connection between memory and nationalism, to prevent them from revolting. The collective identity of a nation is often based on shared memory and experience, and without that it is difficult for unity to form.<sup>14</sup> By breaking the social ties by turning people against each other and hiding their actions, the military government made it difficult for society to remain unified during the eight-year period of the war. Beyond that, the disjointed narratives and lack of collective memory meant that

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<sup>12</sup> Jeffery Olick, *Collective Memory: The Two Cultures* (1999) 105

<sup>13</sup> Olick, *Collective Memory: The Two Cultures* 114

<sup>14</sup> Olick, *Collective Memory: The Two Cultures* 117

citizens were unable to come together after the Dirty War to mourn their dead and hold the perpetrators accountable.<sup>15</sup> Understanding how social memory is formed leads to some insights about how it can shape a society. First, memory that is formed through coercion is just as effective as memory formed through experience because repetition of any idea becomes memory.<sup>16</sup> Second, it gives insight into what tactics are best used to control memory and how people compensate for memory that has been altered or erased.

During the Dirty War, the Argentine government controlled the memory of the population was through control of the media. From a distance, it would seem as though the Argentine press was unusually silent<sup>17</sup>, but upon further investigation, one can see that the silencing of major media outlets was a part of government strategy. Newspapers in Argentina were once defined by their sharp criticisms of authoritarian governments around the world, but in 1976 it was as though a veil of silence dropped over the mainstream media.<sup>18</sup> The silence was created by an effective campaign run by the military government which showed media outlets it was in their self-interest to remain silent throughout the political purges.<sup>19</sup> Media outlets, concerned with their own social and economic standing, let military-endorsed companies continue to advertise in their papers and acted as though nothing was happening. Media silence had national and international consequences. Nationally it meant that people were not receiving unified and unbiased information, but were instead receiving disjointed facts controlled by the government. Internationally it meant that Argentine allies and countries that advocate for human rights could deny what was occurring since they were not reading about it firsthand.

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<sup>15</sup> Antonius Robben, *How Traumatized Societies Remember: The Aftermath of Argentina's Dirty War* (2005)

<sup>16</sup> Olick, *Collective Memory: The Two Cultures* 113

<sup>17</sup> Knudson, *Veil of Silence* 94

<sup>18</sup> Knudson, *Veil of Silence* 94

<sup>19</sup> Knudson, *Veil of Silence* 95



The military government also controlled the memories of citizens through kidnappings and cover-up tactics. The goal of the military government went beyond simply silencing people who may have opposed them. Instead, their goal was to do away with both subversives and anyone who knew them, essentially erasing the public's memory of an entire group of people.<sup>20</sup> While they were not completely successful in that, they successfully created tension between groups who were trying to preserve the memory of their loved ones.

Finally, the military government controlled the narrative surrounding the Dirty War through almost universal denial of the crimes that were committed between 1976 and 1983. Before 1993, there was no open repentance or remorse from those who made up the military government, and any conversation about their crimes happened through a subpoena to testify.<sup>21</sup> Instead of using a process of closure and healing to move on from the crimes of the Dirty War, the democratic government that came in to power at the end of the dictatorship, headed by Raúl Alfonsín, made covering up what occurred in the Dirty War a part of the process of the country moving on from those crimes.<sup>22</sup> When Alfonsín first came to power, his government pursued two policies to find justice for the families affected by the Dirty War. First, they prosecuted former members of the military junta and second, they created an independent commission to investigate the truth about what happened.<sup>23</sup> If one only looked at the initial years of the Alfonsín administration, they would think his government was successful in creating justice for the victims of the Dirty War. Beginning in 1987, his government limited the number of convictions and began pardoning lower-ranking military officials through the Due Obedience and Full Stop

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<sup>20</sup> Tulio Halperin Donghi, *Argentina's Unmastered Past* (1988)

<sup>21</sup> Adolfo Scilingo, TRIAL International

<sup>22</sup> Luis Moreno Ocampo, *Beyond Punishment: Justice in the Wake of Massive Crimes in Argentina* (1999) 681

<sup>23</sup> Ocampo, *Beyond Punishment: Justice in the Wake of Massive Crimes in Argentina* 681

Laws, which were both designed to placate the public's need for justice while protecting military officials to prevent a military rebellion.<sup>24</sup>

Alfonsín's successor, Carlos Menem followed a similar pattern of his predecessor. The transition between President Alfonsín and President Menem in 1989 was the first democratic transition of power in Argentina in 61 years, but it was wrought with tension.<sup>25</sup> When President Menem came to power, he criticized Alfonsín for giving in to the will of the military, but proceeded to give presidential pardons to 277 members of the military including General Jorge Videla.<sup>26</sup> People in power in Argentina continued to allow military officials to go free until the testimonies of Capitan Adolfo Scilingo and Sergeant Victor Ibanez, who openly and willingly admitted the crimes that they committed and in that way forced accountability onto the rest of the perpetrators.<sup>27</sup> Since Capitan Scilingo's testimony, the Argentine government and the rest of the international community have taken steps to reverse the years of denial committed by both the military, the government, and the general population.

### **Current Study**

The purpose of this study is to explore what shapes the memory of those who experienced the Dirty War in Argentina. Studies exist about the history of the Dirty War and the tactics used, but there is a gap in the research in understanding how the memories impact Argentine society today. By using previous studies and scholarly articles as context, this study attempts to build off previous works by focusing on the ways in which the experiences of different groups impact how they remember the Dirty War. My goal in this study is to explore those themes using interviews, open letters, newspaper articles, and movies, to explain what

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<sup>24</sup> Ocampo, *Beyond Punishment: Justice in the Wake of Massive Crimes in Argentina* 685

<sup>25</sup> Christian Shirley, Argentine Departs, Democracy Hardly Bankrupt (The New York Times. July 08, 1989)

<sup>26</sup> Ocampo, *Beyond Punishment: Justice in the Wake of Massive Crimes in Argentina* 686

<sup>27</sup> Testimony of Adolfo Scilingo

shapes how people remember the Dirty War. To accomplish this, I will analyze my primary sources to understand how three key groups, victims, friends and family, and perpetrators, remember the Dirty War.

### **Methods**

This study is based on two questions. First, how did the Argentine military government during the Dirty War use memory suppression as a tactic and second, what are the long-term consequences of that tactic? To answer that question, this study qualitatively analyzes primary sources, movies, and articles written during and about the Dirty War. It also looks at what those memories have meant for society in the years since the dictatorship.

This study draws upon sources that were consolidated both in the initial years of the Alfonsín and Menem governments and in the early-2000s as human rights activists renewed efforts of government accountability. For the most part, the resources used in this study are interviews that were done both with victims who survived the war, friends and families of *los desaparecidos* who passed away, and perpetrators who confessed by choice. To supplement those interviews, I drew upon movies, newspaper articles, and letters that were written by friends and families of the disappeared. I also examined the propaganda of Las Madres y Las Abuelas del Plaza de Mayo, since they are the driving civilian force behind remembering what happened during the dictatorship. The primary sources that I read for this project were all in Spanish, while many of the secondary were in English. I chose to read these sources instead of conduct interviews because of the sensitive nature of this topic. I wanted to use sources from people who made the choice to testify and therefore would share their stories without reservations.

After deciding what sources to use, deciding the method of analysis was the next step in this process. Since I used qualitative analysis, I used a method referred to as “coding” to explore

my sources.<sup>28</sup> My experience with coding is based off a class I took at the University of Puget Sound called “Power and Political Inquiry” which used real-world examples to teach students in the Politics and Government department about methods used in political science research.<sup>29</sup> I chose coding as my method of analysis because I wanted to focus on themes in accounts of the Dirty War to better understand the ways in which memory was suppressed and the long-term consequences of that. Upon my initial readings of the primary sources, it became clear that the experiences of the three groups previously mentioned were incredibly different. Once I realized that, I decided the best course of action would be to organize my analysis by group. During and after each reading, I took note of major themes and commonly repeated words. After doing that, I looked at similarities between things I coded for, and ended with a set of themes for each category. Finally, I looked at codes for the three groups and looked for things that were common across all three. This is an important step because themes that are consistent across all three groups show a dominant aspect of the Dirty War narrative.

### **Analysis**

The three groups that will be analyzed are the testimonies of the survivors of the torture, the friends and families of the disappeared, and the testimony of two perpetrators of the violence. The fourth category in the analysis section consists of themes that were evident in all three sections. There was a significant amount of overlap between testimonies of the survivors and of the friends and families, but to be included in the overarching theme category, it had to be a theme mentioned in testimonies of all three groups. With that in mind, the fourth section will explore the two themes found in all three categories. The goal of each set of analyses is to

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<sup>28</sup> Christopher Howard, *Thinking like a Political Scientist: A Practical Guide to Research Methods* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017)

<sup>29</sup> University of Puget Sound, *Politics and Government Course Guide* (2018)

explore why those are important themes and what those themes say about the long-term consequences of the Dirty War.

### **Survivors**

The term “survivors of the Dirty War” in this context refers to people who were kidnapped, sequestered, and tortured, but who were released for whatever reason. While few of the testimonies talk about how or why they were released, the testimonies of these people can offer insight into many elements of life that were covered up by the military dictatorship. The two trends are offering vivid descriptions of how they were tortured and using names of both victims and perpetrators in their testimonies.

The first theme that stood out in testimonies and stories of victims of torture was in-depth description of the torture that they survived. For many who survived the military regime, they were tortured in more than just one prison camp. Mario Villani, for example, survived torture in five different torture camps including “El Club Atlético”, “El Banco”, and ESMA (The Navy Mechanical School).<sup>30</sup> In his testimony, he talks about the sequence of torture that he witnessed from inside the prison camps. The sequence that was clearly established was “desaparición – tortura – muerte \\ *disappearance – torture – death*” (Mario Villani). Torture tactics used by the perpetrators included using electric currents to shock people and dry drowning. The torture prisoners of the military suffered was rarely just physical. The conditions that prisoners were held in were worse than a pigsty<sup>31</sup> and these conditions were not the result of neglect by the military junta. Poor conditions, lack of interaction with the outside world, and minimal acknowledgment of the passing of time were aspects of psychological torture that members of the junta used to control their victims. Beyond that, Elena Alfaro, another survivor, talks about

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<sup>30</sup> Proyecto Desaparecidos, *Mario Villani*

<sup>31</sup> Proyecto Desaparecidos, *Walter Docters*

having to listen to her detained friends be tortured to get her to confess.<sup>32</sup> This tactic was designed to coerce confession and create intense divides between members of society. This failed, because for the prisoners who survived, talking about their torture is a way for them to come to terms with what happened and is one of the ways they can hold their captors accountable. Carlos Lordkipanidase talks about how the way he remembers what happened and deals with the trauma is to talk and share his narrative.<sup>33</sup> He benefits from it, but it also gives him the chance to speak on behalf of those who are no longer able to do so.

Another way in which survivors of the Dirty War prison camps try to foster accountability is by naming fellow victims and torturers. This trend is especially complex because there is a dichotomy in the goal of naming people who existed in the space of these prison camps. For the names of the victims, it is important because the “disappearing tactic” used by the military government means that many families still do not know what happened to their loved ones. If prisoners name those who did not survive, there is a chance that families will recognize the names of their loved ones and get closure. In terms of naming perpetrators, the Due Obedience and Full Stop laws meant that lower-level officials were not held accountable for the crimes they helped commit. By naming their torturers, the names will be public record and may force those perpetrators to reckon with their crimes. Remembering the names of victims is not just something that survivors are doing after the Dirty War. In his testimony, Walter Doeters talks about how him and his fellow victims shared stories, names, and family histories to protect their memories during physical and psychological torture designed to blur those memories. Many, including Elena Alfaro, cited that they felt an obligation to share their stories to prevent the government from successfully erasing what occurred.

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<sup>32</sup> Proyecto Desaparecidos, *Elena Alfaro*

<sup>33</sup> Proyecto Desaparecidos, *Carlos Lordkipanidase*

For the survivors of torture in the Dirty War, their efforts in the present are focused on preserving these memories and promoting accountability. The two themes analyzed in this section, describing torture and naming people in testimonies, have continued to be important as Argentinian society struggles reckon with divides and national trauma. Lack of government cooperation or documentation has meant that the international community has relied on testimonies of these survivors to understand what happened in the torture camps between 1976 and 1983.

### **Friends and Families of the Disappeared**

The second group of primary sources analyzed are testimonies, stories, and open letters written by friends and families of the disappeared. In many cases these are friends who were participating in the same activities as someone who was sequestered, or family members who never received closure after a loved one was “disappeared”. This section will explore three themes. The first two intersect and are the sentiment of guilt and responsibility that friends and family feel. The third theme is the lack of opportunity to share, so many of these testimonies were the first time someone could share their stories about what happened.

The sentiment of guilt and responsibility was a defining element of most stories and open letters. The individual guilt has been expanded to a sense of national guilt that continues to define Argentina today. For many, the core of that guilt is that many people were kidnapped from the public way in the presence of bystanders, who did nothing and failed to speak out. As Walter Docters says in his testimony, the prison camps in Argentina were not a secret, the world just chose to ignore them. People who committed similar crimes to friends or family that were disappeared felt a distinct type of guilt because they continue to live while a loved one was tortured and murdered. Alicia Rodríguez, the classmate of many who were disappeared, put it simply by saying “me siento culpable \\ *I feel guilty*” (Alicia Rodríguez). The sad stories of the

guilt are, at times, countered by people trying to remember positive stories about those that they loved. In an open letter from a brother of the disappeared, he mentions his sentiment of guilt, but his main point throughout the letter is that he is responsible for sharing the wonderful stories he remembers about his brother with the world.<sup>34</sup> He is using his ability to share stories to advocate for a world that his brother would be proud of. This sentiment of responsibility is summed up in a letter written by a sister of the disappeared. She says “estoy aqui porque tengo memoria \\ *I am here because I have memory*”.<sup>35</sup> She can testify, and because she has that ability, she has the responsibility to advocate for her sister.

Another important theme in the stories and letters of friends and families of the victims is the fact that they felt like they could never speak out due to government efforts, before and after the Dirty War, to use a cover up as the way to heal the nation. For example, Juan Martín Aiub Ronco’s family disappeared within the first year of the Dirty War, but he did not give his testimony until October 26, 2005.<sup>36</sup> That 22-year difference meant he spent those years dealing with the trauma of a disappeared family without any sense of closure or societal validation. There have been efforts from both the Alfonsín and Menem governments to consolidate these stories, but many have still gone untold. NGOs like Memoria Abierta and Los Desaparecidos, which is where many of the testimonies referred to in this paper have come from, offer an open platform for people to share their stories. There is a lot of psychological research that says people need to process traumatic events to receive the closure that they need to move on.<sup>37</sup> Since people did not openly speak of the Dirty War in the direct aftermath, they were forced to constantly

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<sup>34</sup> Proyecto Desaparecidos, *Open Letter from a Brother*

<sup>35</sup> Proyecto Desaparecidos, *Open Letter from a Sister*

<sup>36</sup> Proyecto Desaparecidos, *Testimony of Juan Aiub Ronco*

<sup>37</sup> Luis Roniger and Mario Sznajder, *The Politics of Memory and Oblivion in Redemocratized Argentina and Uruguay* (1998)



relieve their trauma instead of getting closure, since that was the only way to ensure the memories of that time lived on. In reading those testimonies, there is a sense of relief that permeates their stories. By being able to share their stories, and by being able to read the stories of others, they got a sense of closure and validation that they had been missing.

The stories of the friends and family of the disappeared are characterized by guilt, responsibility, and a sense of relief. These stories are important because they are the only voices for victims in the Dirty War who were murdered and they have had to face the consequences of societal divide and lack of closure because of government censorship.

### **Perpetrators**

Willing testimonies from members of the military government during the Dirty War are difficult to come by. From shame in admitting what they had done to government efforts to sweep crimes under the rug, there were few instances in which the perpetrators willingly chose to share their stories. The passing of the Due Obedience and Full Stop laws created an isolated caste in society, in which former members of the military were safe from prosecution but were forced to live with the crimes that they committed.<sup>38</sup> Two of the most famous testimonies from members of the military government are the testimonies of Capitan Adolfo Scilingo and Sergeant Victor Ibanez, who both worked for the government during the first few years of the Dirty War. In this section, I will begin by exploring the stories of these two men, analyzing where their narratives are similar and where they are different. Then I will proceed to exploring two prominent themes in their narratives. First I will look at the ways Due Obedience and Full Stop shaped the testimonies, and then I will look at the ways in which these two men talk about their role in comparison to the role of the government.

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<sup>38</sup> *ibid.*

Capitan Adolfo Scilingo and Sergeant Victor Ibanez have stories that are similar in some ways, but different in many others. Both were military officials at the naval academy during the initial years of the Dirty War, between 1976 and 1978. Both men testified in 1995 and were groundbreaking in their testimonies. Capitan Scilingo was the first military official to publically testify to his crimes without a court summons and Sergeant Ibanez was the first to offer eye-witness testimonies of the death flights that they both oversaw.<sup>39</sup> Their stories differ in terms of the trajectory of their testimony. Ibanez only testified in Argentina, meaning he could not be prosecuted under the Full Stop and Due Obedience laws. Capitan Scilingo first told his story in Argentina, but in 1997 he traveled to Spain to testify in front of a worldwide audience. Since Full Stop and Due Obedience do not apply anywhere outside of Argentina, Capitan Scilingo was tried for crimes against humanity and is currently serving a 30-year sentence in Spain.

While neither man explicitly mentions the Full Stop and Due Obedience laws in their testimonies, the immunity that those laws would have granted them as lower-level military officials clearly drives elements of their testimonies. As previously mentioned, both initially testified in Argentina, where they could share their stories to relieve their guilt, but could not be prosecuted for them. I argue that Due Obedience and Full Stop made them willing to testify and that neither were completely ready to be held accountable for their actions. Once he testified and was subsequently sentenced, him and his attorneys attempted to have the sentence thrown away and then reduced, showing that he was not ready to truly be held accountable for what he did. While it is easy to applaud these men for being willing to come forward, they were not prepared to accept full responsibility for their crimes, and when they were, they attempted to fight it.

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<sup>39</sup> Noe Wesley Montez, *Memory, Transitional Justice, and Theatre in Postdictatorship Argentina* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press 2018) p.20

The final theme that stood out in the testimonies of these two military officials was the ways in which they spoke about difference between the role that they played and the role that high-level military officials played. By being willing to step forward, both men took some responsibility for their actions, but certain elements of their stories also showed that they placed the blame elsewhere. Throughout Adolfo Scilingo's testimony he talks a lot about how he may have been the one to push the button, but the military government orchestrated the consequences of what happened when the button was pushed. Here he is drawing on the rationale of Due Obedience, which argues that lower-level officials did not know what was occurring. While there may be some validity to this claim, it is important to push back on that. The crimes that he was committing were not simply pushing a button. He could witness firsthand the violent acts he helped commit. Ibanez, in a similar way, claims he did not know what he was signing up for when he became a member of the military. When he heard the term war, he assumed face-to-face physical combat where people on both sides had agency in it. In his testimony, he says that "no amount of planning or thought could have prepared him for the crimes that he committed".<sup>40</sup>

The testimonies of Capitan Scilingo and Sergeant Ibanez show the dichotomy of remorse and self-interest that characterizes government sentiment towards victims of the Dirty War. The long-term consequences of this are that there is a lack of closure for families of their victims. While Capitan Scilingo's testimony gave many the opportunity to testify to his crimes, his eventual attempt to get his sentence thrown away revoked the closure that victims and their families received from his admittance of the truth. On the flip side of that, the fact that Capitan Scilingo received any punishment offered a sense of closure to the families of the victims that he was responsible for torturing. It is impossible to qualify the sentiments that come through with one

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<sup>40</sup> Testimony of Victor Ibanez

specific theme, because the testimonies of these two men challenge norms of testifying to admit wrongdoing, since they both denied their involvement in various ways.

### **Overarching themes**

After analyzing themes from the first three groups, two themes stood out as defining the general narrative of the Dirty War. One of the tactics of the military government was to create disjointed narratives so that the population was not effective in holding them accountable for their actions. This makes these overarching themes critical to increased accountability because it meant that there are parts of the narrative that are not disjointed and these could ultimately be used to rebuild unity in Argentina. In Argentina after the Dirty War there was a lack of coordination since people were sharing a wide variety of stories, but if people could use these unifying themes, it would create a more effective front against government censorship of what happened during the war.

The first theme that is constant across narratives of the Dirty War is the fate of women who were pregnant while they were kidnapped. In Adolfo Scilingo's testimony, he explains in detail what happened to those women. For women who were pregnant, they were taken to a certain prison until they had their child. When they had their child, they were told by the military that their child was going to a close relative or family friend. Those children went to military families or people that were popular with the military government. The aftermath of this is inter-generational trauma and the creation of a part of the population that is automatically displaced. In the movie "La Historia Oficial", directed by Luis Puenzo, the viewer is taken through the experience of finding out your child was taken from a woman who was eventually tortured and murdered. That film and accounts from Las Madres y Las Abuelas de la Plaza de Mayo shows that this action from the government have had some of the most severe consequences on society today.

The second theme that was present in accounts from victims, perpetrators, and friends and families is the reclaiming of the truth and the protection of the legacy of the disappeared. Many of these testimonies talk about the importance of speaking on behalf of those who are not able to speak for themselves. In an open letter from one of Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo, she talks about “el reclamo de la verdad \\ *the reclaiming of the truth*” and her belief that reclaiming the truth should be the main goal of all Argentinians in response to the horrors that occurred between 1976 and 1983. Capitan Scilingo and Sergeant Ibanez also talk about reclaiming the truth, though their goals are slightly different than those of victims and loved ones. These two men share their stories to limit their personal guilt, but their testimonies are also critical to reclaiming the truth because they are some of the few people in the world able to share eye-witness accounts of methods of torture and what happened within the government.

### **Long-Term Consequences**

In many ways, the long-term consequences of the Dirty War are difficult to qualify since a taboo still exists in the country around discussing the Dirty War. The national trauma that began in 1976 became intergenerational through the tactics that the military government used against pregnant women and the denial from the government that prevented families from receiving closure for their loved ones. The horrific treatment of pregnant women and the creation of a “lost generation” of children has perpetuated the trauma past the immediate aftermath of the Dirty War. As the children who were separated from their families come of age, they have begun to ask questions about their real parents, and as they begin to learn the truth, the trauma is re-opened. Beyond that, the fact that many of these children still have not been reunited with their families means the Abuelas of the Plaza must continue their efforts. This has resulted in increased dissent towards the government and continuous reliving of the Dirty War.

Many previous scholarly works talk about how the lack of closure is the result of the constant reopening of these wounds that is needed to keep those who were tortured in the public's mind. There has been no opportunity for closure or peace of mind for those people. By choosing to cover up what occurred during the Dirty War, the government opted for a path of concealment instead of closure. If the government had allowed citizens to come to terms with their trauma and be open about what occurred, it is possible that the wounds from the Dirty War would have healed 42 years later. The cover ups and secretive tactics of the government meant that Argentinian citizens were never able to process what happened to them. As the international community and the Argentine government has become more transparent by releasing documents, the process of closure that should have happened in 1983 is still occurring today.

### **Conclusion**

The Dirty War in Argentina is a nuanced topic that is difficult to study due to the horrific nature of events and the government's efforts to hide what occurred. The goal of this study was to examine primary sources, including open letters and testimonies, scholarly articles, and film, to better understand what dominates the narratives of the Dirty War. From that exploration, I wanted to see how the government used tactics that resulted in the repression of memory and from there wanted to explore the long-term consequences in society. While analyzing the sources, there were themes that shone through that, in my opinion, should have been unifying factors in society, but were often pushed to the side because of government denial and social control. In terms of future research, an in-depth analysis of testimonies from government officials and perpetrators of the Dirty War would be beneficial to understanding their role in the long-term oppression of society. As one can see in my analysis, it is difficult to qualify the testimonies of the two government officials I looked at, since their testimonies show a

combination of reclaiming the truth and self-interest. Further analysis of their stories could better our understanding of how high-ranking government officials used lower-ranking officials to implement long-term consequences of members of Argentine society.

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